

# The quick and the dead

**F**ew fads have done more harm to our golf greens than the senseless chase after speed on putting surfaces, triggered off at the start of each year by what has become known as the 'Augusta Syndrome'.

Not even the phase of soft boggy greens as a result of often unrecognised over-watering and over-feeding a decade ago was as reprehensible, in that it was the result of bad greenkeeping and not a direct cause of a consciously applied bad policy.

The scene was set – as have so many of our greenkeeping problems – by the Professional Tour. With Stimpometers akimbo they demanded from committees and greenkeepers faster and faster greens and got them – but at what cost! Set the mowers down – and then set them down further still. Fit 'tournament' bottom blades and shave the greens – never mind the results.

Of course if the soonest you are going to see those poor suffering greens again is a full year away, (and often much longer) one can readily adopt a philosophical attitude to the inevitable aftermath.

The debacle at this year's Open may yet serve a purpose in showing players and spectators alike the rather too embarrassingly premature results of excessively close mowing, which all too often does not show until long after the television cameras have departed.

It is assumed that golfers want fast greens – though I am not too sure that this is inevitably true, as too many of today's new entrants seem to prefer soft holding greens to firm fast putting surfaces. Nevertheless the professionals certainly demand them.

Undoubtedly, shaving greens down to the bone will speed them up, but if this savage treatment is prolonged for more than a few days, let alone weeks, then the finer leaved species are the first to thin out and die. One famous Surrey golf course renowned in the 1970s for having greens which were yellow, stagnant thatchy bogs "smelling like a sewage farm", managed by a consistently sensible policy to restore a respectable proportion of the finer grasses in the next decade. Then suddenly, back they went to annual meadow grass, (no thatch because aeration was maintained), with the addition of dead dry patches instead. The reason was easy to identify but impossible to correct, because those in the driving seat wanted fast greens and the edict went out to mow at one eighth from April to October. Despite forecasts of the inevitable results, this policy was not amended.

It must be stressed beyond argument, that persistently shaving greens to one eighth will eventually kill them. There simply is not enough food production through the shaved-off leaves to keep the roots going.

The poorer the grass species the worse the eventual damage. Our old 'friend' annual meadow grass produces much slower surfaces, even when it is not seeding prolifically, than the finer leaved fescues and bents, but these are much more susceptible to close mowing, so in the end you get a double-dose, slower as well as damaged greens.

There are other ways of speeding up putting surfaces than dropping the blades that seem to have escaped the 'speed kings' notice. Many of these methods have been practiced for years, decades before the Stimpometer was dreamt of. In my view we must resurrect some of these ideas – whilst dismissing those that are claimed to work but which quantified research on both sides of the Atlantic proved to be false.

Needless to say, the biggest influence on speed of putting surface is the species of grass. A classic example is the new course at Mill Ride in Ascot, probably the best new course built in this decade in England, The pure fescue greens are

mown at heights just above a quarter inch, with Stimpometer readings – I can confirm – around nine feet. It is all too symptomatic of the great divide that separates golf on either side of the Atlantic that a visiting American golf course architect (renowned for his obsession with water features, bumps and tortuous designs) who came to see the course, took one look at the first green and said "Good heavens (or words to that effect), you've got pure fescue greens – what on earth do you want them for?" He got told!

If you doubt my word, take advantage of a limited offer to play the course (subject only to production of a handicap certificate) for the ridiculously low fee of £15 per round – (but ring 0344 886777 first) – and enjoy the luxury of a millionaires course which brilliant design, first class construction and inspired greenkeeping has created out of what had been mainly flat polo fields. But of course if you don't have pure fescue greens, it is no good talking about their advantages.

How then can we speed up greens without mowing them to destruction? Certainly regular verticutting and grooming will add 12 inches to the Stimpometer reading, though brushing has proved to have no effect. Despite traditional belief, sanding has no significant effect either, even at almost ridiculously intensive application levels, e.g. 28 light and 5 heavy sandings over two years on bent greens (University of Pennsylvania) even when combined with deep verticutting and shallow aeration.

Although rain can slow down greens (and even dew, if not switched as a normal routine), within sensible limits the drying out of greens by severely limiting irrigation did not significantly speed them up.

However, the one treatment which improved speed above all others – save shaving – albeit of a temporary nature, was rolling. This has been known for almost all this century. Who of my generation has not, years ago, seen a hand machine with a box full of sand and the blades raised taken over greens, partly to give the striped effect and partly to speed up putting surfaces. Since deep aeration is now simple, practicable and effective, any bad effects can be corrected before they show and the finer grasses survive to provide better conditions for yet another day!

However, matters will not improve until the demand is altered. That demand comes from the Tour and those who ape them and must be resisted. Greenkeepers and agronomists alike must ensure that sound greenkeeping methods designed to give 365 days a year golf prevail. With present developments, including the Tour being represented on both the Educational and Technical Panels advising the R&A's Joint Golf Course Committee, I am not optimistic, especially as I am told it was at the R&A's request. In fact, any day now I expect to hear proposals that the Tour – with its 'experienced agronomists' – should take over courses from greenkeepers for six weeks before an event to ensure perfection and that this should be extended to R&A Championships as well as their own tournaments. Firm denials that this is the last thing on their minds would worry me more than silence!

Young professionals are being instructed in greenkeeping. Soon perhaps to be added will be catering and book-keeping, business management and administration so they can take over from the stewards and the secretary – all in the interests of televised golf. Or am I being unkind?

Golf was and is essentially an amateur game and only constant vigilance will stop the professional take-over, because to give them credit the pros at least know where they want to go and do not lack leadership.



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